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Assessing the 'Quality' in Qualitative Research The Case of Text–Audience Relations

Barker, Martin

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tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

A number of recent works on methodology for media and communication studies have sought to embrace the contributions from cultural studies qualitative investigations, in particular for their contribution to our understanding of media texts. But a problem is emerging from this. While their discussions reference the characteristic measures of validity for quantitative research, no equivalent measures of the strength of qualitative researches have yet emerged. This article draws on David Silverman's work to formulate a number of proposals to remedy this gap. These are tested against four recent investigations of one phenomenon: women as viewers of violent/horror films.

Key Words cultural studies, texts and audiences, qualitative research, validity measures, women as audiences

An important development in recent years within media and communication studies has been a broad move towards (some would say, return to) methodological pluralism. Questioning the sharp separation of quantitative and qualitative approaches, this move has been reflected in recent books on research methodology. For instance, Deacon et al. at the start of their (1999) book, make the bold move of welcoming 'undisciplined study' (Deacon et al., 1999: 3), by which they mean the conscious pursuit of as many styles and methods of research as seem likely to contribute to our understanding of the complex interweaving of communication systems and processes with social and political life. Rejecting in advance disciplinary preferences, they argue that communication research will proceed best if it is interdisciplinary, open to many questions and many methods. Even so, they add, once having adopted a method, you have to be sure that you are using it well, thoroughly and consistently.

The distinction between quantitative and qualitative approaches to research is of course more complicated than simply a choice between the use of numerical and statistical procedures on the one hand, and the search for patterned relationships on the other (see the useful discussion of this in Bryman, 2001: 244–6). It also raises a set of issues about how researchers constitute their concepts and categories for grasping human behaviours – whether from their own perceptions and understandings, or from the subjects themselves whom they are researching. This leads to the third, philosophical level of debates between broadly positivist and broadly hermeneutic methodologies. Because of these complexities of levels, it is not uncommon for those on the hermeneutic side of the argument to use numerical and statistical procedures from time to time. But in recent years, the long debates between these two traditions have been shifted by the rise of cultural studies approaches. This has particularly been the case in relation to research and arguments over the ways we understand media 'texts', where cultural studies work has been determinedly qualitative, and their relations to audiences, where research has been more mixed. Deacon et al.'s (1999) work is

one of a number of recent studies which have shown a willingness to be inclusive towards these approaches, even though they may sometimes sit uncomfortably with more traditional modes of research.

Yet there is a problem, as I see it. While their chapters on quantitative methods scrupulously take readers through the standard significance tests for measuring validity and reliability, nothing so clear is offered for determining the strength of qualitative researches – not even on a distributed basis (when doing document analysis, be sure you have done this; when conducting observation, be sure you have done that). This is despite their apt warning (Deacon et al., 1999: 7) about qualitative researchers' tendency to slip unnoticed and undigested quantitative claims into their arguments to boost their apparent strength.

The same gap may be found in another recent collection, within which James Halloran (1998) gives a powerful and inclusive overview of the traditions and methods of research now available to mass communications researchers. He ends with the same warning:

. . . although the social scientific approach adopted here is very inclusive, it is not totally so, there being no room for mere perspectivalism. The complexity of our subject matter demands an eclectic approach (ideally a *critical* eclectic approach) embracing complementary perspectives. This does not solve our problem, particularly with regard to theory-building, and it can still lead to a situation where research results can be found to support virtually any viewpoint on any given issue. (Halloran, 1998: 32)

The call in parentheses for a critical approach is welcome, but Halloran's only comment on the problems this implies is to wish, optimistically, for people to work towards 'maturity through consensus' – not a bad hope, but not easily operationalized.

It is the nature of that limitation which concerns me. In the recent methodological literature which has sought to be inclusive to qualitative cultural studies research, it is hard to find any elaborated criteria for what will distinguish more convincing from less convincing, stronger from weaker, research. Because of this, it is not uncommon to find easy dismissals of these kind of research. In particular, cultural studies' attempts to combine analysis of cultural 'texts' with various forms of qualitative study of 'lived experience' have been challenged (see, for instance, Philo and Miller, 1998). Even less hostile evaluations emphasize the inherent limitations or simple 'uncheckability' of such work.

One very recent book on methodology positively celebrates what I would see as a failing. Ann Gray (2003) would appear to make this article's discussion virtually redundant. Gray, situating herself within a 'mainstream' cultural studies tradition, unfolds an argument quite at odds with the one which I am making. She too celebrates the achievements and possibilities of qualitative research, and indeed values highly the encounters between textual analytic traditions and other 'ethnographic' modes of research. And like the other writings I have cited, she values the sheer diversity of contemporary styles of research: 'I regard this methodological eclecticism to be a strength within the field' (Gray, 2003: 5). But she effectively turns her back on any attempt to establish tests, of the kind I am seeking, of research strength. Her book provides therefore an important test-case.

Gray's book, directed first and foremost at research students, contains a great deal that is sensible and helpful, but it puts a puzzling halt to its deliberations when it comes to the issue of assessing the strength of research. Adopting the slogan 'there is no such thing as a disinterested knower' (Gray, 2003: 2), Gray appears to see this as diminishing the need to enquire into whether a researcher is *effectively, convincingly, or reliably* 'interested'. This may appear an unfair judgement given that in two places (Gray, 2003: 71–7; 188–90) she directly engages with questions of validity and reliability. Indeed, near the end of her book, she writes: 'I now want to return to questions of validity and to develop this further suggesting, following Denzin, that we require new criteria for assessing research practices which "flow from the qualitative project"' (Gray, 2003: 188). However, what emerges, I would argue, is a replacement of the measurement of surety by virtue of its adequacy to the world, by its measurement on ethical/political grounds.

Gray celebrates three qualities in the research to which she repeatedly turns. First, she emphasizes the importance of researchers' relations with those they research. Gray has discussed at length the virtues of research as the vehicle for the life stories of individuals, including a critical discussion of some of her work. She reflects back on this at the end of the book:

Throughout the book I have emphasised the importance of respecting respondents or participants of research. This should be reflected in the account given of methods as well as in the ways in which the individual or collective accounts are dealt with in the text. Is the interpretation sensitive to the stories being told and to what extent are they allowed into the text? Are the theoretical frameworks used modestly and tentatively or do they, as in my example of Hilary's [one of Gray's respondents] portrait, threaten to evacuate the respondents through heavy-handed or arrogant analysis? (Gray, 2003: 189)

Second, she emphasizes the self-awareness that the researcher displays. Drawing on Ken Plummer's work, she stresses the 'uniqueness' of the findings of various kinds of cultural studies work (case studies and life stories, for example), counterposing this to tests of 'generalisability' or 'representativeness' (Gray, 2003: 74). This leads her to valorize the personal-political position of the researcher:

These questions of evaluative criteria are important but, as Plummer says, he is not arguing for an 'anything goes' approach to research, rather, the reverse. Once we acknowledge the constructed nature of social knowledge, then this makes us much more aware of the range of determinates at play. The extent to which the researcher acknowledges this and reflects on the process and her or his role as researcher in the production of knowledge, should be an important 'validity' criteria – ironically one which would be ruled out by the 'reliability' criteria. (Gray, 2003 page??)

Finally, she places stress on the way research is written up. She criticizes styles of research which make claims to authority through rhetorical strategies. The most appropriate styles are those, she argues, in which the subjectivity of the researcher is apparent. All three criteria, then, place personal-political qualities centre-stage. In this respect, Gray is very much in line with particular traditions of feminist thinking about research.

My worries with her first position are centred on two counter-claims which have a long history. Gray's position presumes, first, that we are in some sense *on the side of* those whom we are

researching. We are in effect conduits for their otherwise unheard conditions, experiences and perceptions. There are many problems, I would argue, with this position. It is true that early on (Gray, 2003: 51–2) she does address the problem of ‘researching up’, or investigating those with power. But this is a marginal note in an argument that overall is heading elsewhere.

It seems to me that there is a fundamental ambiguity in her notion of ‘respect’, which I would illustrate from my own history. Many years ago, I researched the 1950s campaign against the ‘horror comics’ (Barker, 1984). One aspect of my research included interviewing a number of former campaign activists. At one level, I had no respect at all for the positions they held then, or indeed explained to me in recollection. I believed that they were wrong, and that indeed their motives were highly suspect. However, at another level, ‘respect’ for them was constituted through seeking to hear what exactly and specifically they said then, and how they wanted to recall their activities and beliefs now. This second kind of ‘respect’ enabled me to identify some very particular local shifts and emphases which would probably have been hidden, if I had been respectful in the first sense. Indeed, being disrespectful in one sense enabled me to formulate a hypothesis about the role of the then Conservative government which I was subsequently able to check. It also led me to argue that they, indeed, had been highly disrespectful to another group – the committed readers of the horror comics – to whom they had imputed certain qualities and views. Some years later, returning to the topic (Barker, 1999), I was able to part-identify who these might have been, and to think why they have left almost no trace. Gray’s concept of ‘respect’ would have disabled my research, I would argue. This is so not simply because I needed to be able to conduct interviews with those I then felt the need to criticize, but also because those to whom I was most sympathetic were unavailable to me in any form, partly because their social location not only made them invisible but also almost certainly incapable of putting into words how these comics mattered to them.

The second problem is inherent in the last comment. It strikes me that Gray’s account of research is in danger of *evacuating the very purpose of research* even as it is ‘on the side of’ the researched. I would argue that a primary purpose of research, as against other kinds of writing, is precisely to display aspects of the topic under examination which cannot be grasped by ordinary means. The research act is one of disclosure, or probing below the surface of the apparent and the obvious. Clearly research is not the only kind of worthwhile writing. Nor is it the private province of professional academics. But we cannot foreclose the possibility that our research will give us expertise not readily available to those about whose lives we are researching.

The ambiguity I am pointing to is between respect for those we research as ethical subjects, whose lives we seek to enhance in some way through our research, and respect for them as fellow humans whom we are seeking to understand – where, therefore, the primary consideration is the accuracy and adequacy of our account of them. There are, without question, a host of important ethical and political questions about what is seen as worth knowing, how researchers relate to those they research, and who owns the resultant knowledge. But I want to argue that there has to be a ‘moment’ in the research act when the primary question is the truth-value of our findings. To use a deliberately tendentious example, Timothy Glander’s recent uncovering of the depth of American state, CIA and military involvement in the rise of the American mass communications enterprise is the stronger since his critique operates at many levels: certainly displaying the highly dubious and concealed motives behind the research; including the manipulative definition of the process of

communication; but also questioning the sheer reliability on many counts of the resultant 'knowledge' (Glander, 2000).

Borrowing criteria

If the greeting of cultural studies has not been well matched by consideration of how we may determine the strengths and weaknesses of its research, it may be worth looking into other fields – and the reasons why these may be more fruitful are worth considering. David Silverman's (2000) outstanding volume *Doing Qualitative Research* devotes a chapter to the 'Contested Nature of Qualitative Research'. Silverman takes four examples of published research from the broad field of health and social policy studies, and shows how it is possible to identify relative strengths and weaknesses in the studies, of kinds which allow methodological generalizations. He structures his argument around four propositions (see Silverman, 2000: 283–4), which can be summarized as follows:

1. How far does research draw upon already existing social scientific conceptual apparatuses, and thereby in turn contribute to the further development of social theory?
2. How far can our data, methods and findings satisfy criteria of reliability and validity?
3. How far are our methodological choices made on the basis of knowing and considering alternatives, as against following the dictates of convenience or fashion?
4. How useable are our findings, and in what ways might their validity be put to the test by practitioners?

But in showing how these four propositions may be put into practice, Silverman in effect goes further. So, for instance, in taking the troublesome question of what 'reliability' and 'validity' might mean for non-statistical researches, Silverman proposes that a useful measure of researches' viability can be its ability to deal with difficult cases. If a theory, or framework, either only works when applied to favoured cases, or squeezes the differences out of materials, that marks a weakness. Or again, addressing the question of the ways in which significance may be found, if materials are treated as commonsensically 'obvious', and no mode of analysis applied which generates meaningful connections between them and the body of concepts supposedly being tested, that again marks a weakness.

I find these proposals very valuable. And it is notable that they have arisen in a field where demands of users, and tests of practice, are more acute than for many working in the media and cultural studies fields. As Silverman says, where research depends on funders who at some point want to know the useful outcomes of research, and where getting it wrong has determinate consequences, the question 'Sez who?' becomes more urgent. My suspicion is that media and cultural researchers have had the luxury of not needing in general to ask these questions precisely because too much of our research has remained walled in academia. Despite broad claims of 'political significance', few actions or applications have tested the viability of our claims. In recent years, at academic conferences, I have found myself on several occasions in the situation of asking colleagues if they

can name one proposition which has been developed, elaborated and tested by empirical research – and as a result of such testing discarded or refined into a more precise and secure form.

Testing Silverman's approach

In what follows, therefore, I begin from Silverman's approach, but with the aim of testing his criteria through use and thence to see if they may benefit from reformulation. My procedure has been as follows: through analysing four pieces of research addressing the same broad topic, I aim to test out the usefulness of his measures. The examples have been chosen because they all address the same broad question: how and why do women enjoy violent and horrific films? The four studies – by Isabel Pinedo (1997), Brigid Cherry (1999), Justin Nolan and Gary Ryan (2000) and Annette Hill (2001) – derive from markedly distinct theoretical orientations and use widely different research strategies. This permits an examination and comparison of the strength of their research procedures. That I conclude that there are significant limitations in each case should not be read as a dismissal of these researches (indeed, one of them, Hill, appears in a book of which I was a co-editor). Rather, I would argue that if we can determine the limits of their strength, it thereby becomes possible to ask how such research might be developed and improved.

Nolan and Ryan (2000)

Nolan and Ryan conducted their research within a social-psychological framework, in fact using a set of procedures with a large quantitative component. However, their concern is precisely with the ways in which previous researches in this field have presumed and placed limits around what emotions women *might* feel. They criticize, for instance, Mundorf et al. (1989) for restricting the range of possible emotional responses to very generic categories such as 'fright', 'boredom' and 'enjoyment'. Their procedure instead is to gather up responses from women and men, and code the collected responses of 100 men and women asked about their favourite horror films, counting – and then semantically organizing – the words used which express emotional response, and those which indicate what qualities a film has to have to be enjoyed.

They found, first, a substantial overlap in women's and men's languages of response. Films were perceived in substantially the same ways, they argue. However, two divergent tendencies emerge. First, men tend to prefer films which are constructed around an opposition between a (safe) city and a countryside populated by dangerous strangers, while women tend to choose films where the setting is domestic, and the danger is imported by known people who are 'possessed' in some fashion. Second, while female viewers primarily express emotions of fear ('vulnerable', 'horrified', 'exposed'), male viewers are likely also to use languages of disturbance and anger ('uneasy', 'disturbed', 'anxious'). Nolan and Ryan comment that this suggests that the men are feeling that they ought to be able to do something about the situation – they ought to be 'bearers of justice'. It is their frustration at having only to watch that produces the anger response. Nolan and Ryan propose an explanatory parallel between these findings, and the statistical fact that while men are more likely to meet violence at the hands of strangers, women are more likely to meet violence at home, from acquaintances.

This is a truncated description of an interesting piece of research. How might it be evaluated? It seems to me that while on some of Silverman's criteria (in particular, grounding its concepts and methods within a recognized approach; and having a secure data-gathering procedure) their research stands up well, the step to theorization is more troublesome, on several grounds. First, there is a tendency for theory to be imported from elsewhere, whose fit with the data collected is not clearly established. This is how, for instance, Nolan and Ryan seek to make the link with women:

. . . females are more cognizant of an additional sub-theme within the slasher genre: spiritual or demonic possession. Occult films generally depict men and women as equally vulnerable to spiritual possession, with women emerging as 'restored' and men 'reconstructed' via the process of exorcism (Clover). Clover also asserts that the emotional component of these films, like the concept of the paranormal, is feminine in character. Thus, female receptivity to images of possession in the horror and slasher genres probably stems from the cultural association between femininity and the occult. Females are also clearly responsive to occult film images in which children are cast as aggressors. Sobchack posits that children have played socially important roles as villains in the dramatization of family terror on screen. . . . Bordering on the taboo horror films are not above characterizing children as the perpetrators of murder and evil, in which betrayed intimacy assumes the form of negating the bond between parent and child and, more dramatically, between mother and infant. (Nolan and Ryan, 2000:43)

A number of steps are taken here which are least incomplete and quite possibly problematic. There is an undeveloped issue about how and why these are *enjoyable* responses. The virtue of Nolan and Ryan's research is in their insistence on getting men and women to choose, and then to talk about, their own favourite horror films. But the languages extracted all *appear* to be negative, the opposite of pleasure. An elaborated model which could count as an explanation of their findings might well be possible. What might it look like? To see what it might be, we need to see that there is an implicit and unstated premise in their argument that watching horror films is a form of *rehearsal*. Men, in feeling uneasy and angry, are taking on the mantle of potential bringers of justice. Women, on the other hand, are apparently dealing with their socially induced fears in more coded fashion. To develop this idea usefully would require an investigation – both conceptually and empirically – of the idea that audiences are developing *strategies of use* of the media from which they are seeking simultaneously pleasure, and assistance in handling the emotional consequences of perceived dangers. The results of this may not sit easily with Nolan and Ryan's persistent use of rather ahistorical theories derived from social psychology, because such strategies are surely likely to be learnt within specific social and cultural contexts.

But there is also an unacknowledged implication in the parallel proposed between the different risks of violence facing men and women, and their film choices. For this to work, it must be the case that men and women are *aware* of the sources of danger to themselves, *and* that this awareness functions in their film choices. A test can relatively easily be envisaged. Since 'awareness' is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon, it would be possible to devise a scaling test, to explore the relations among horror fans between film preferences, modes of responding and effective senses of social danger. The trouble is, again, that the outcomes of that may not sit so well with the overarching theoretical framework governing their research, which seem rather to point to a gender-essentialist

distinction between men's and women's responses.

The difficulties I am pointing to in Nolan and Ryan's research all arise at the point at which an explanatory model is proposed. Because this is not spelled out as a working model, in which assumptions and steps can be clearly seen, it is hard to see what links in the chain of reasoning in the model might be subject to tests of any kind.

Pinedo (1997)

Isabel Pinedo's research derives from an entirely different source. Based within feminist textual analysis, Pinedo is motivated by a gap between what feminist theory said women should enjoy, and her personal experience of loving horror films since childhood. Her starting point therefore is the *structuring absences* in previous researches: Linda Williams 'fails to recognise the pleasures of not-seeing', Carol Clover's (1992) 'concern with gender is strictly limited to male viewers', Barbara Creed 'has little to say about how [the monstrous-feminine] might speak to women about female power' (Pinedo, 1997: 70). But in one respect her research is continuous with their cultural-political concerns: while she wishes to undo their monolithic account, she still wishes to be able to locate what she calls 'progressive, critical films'.

Pinedo studied over 600 horror films (a substantial body, and itself contributing to the force of her research), looking at the patterns of textual formation and address to viewers in order to try to identify those forms which most readily make space for women's pleasure.¹ She develops an argument that slasher films, by allowing shifting points of view, allow a *play* with the meanings of gender:

Through fantasy, the viewer can identify with a variety of viewpoints, including different gender characters and positions that exceed the identity the viewer holds consciously. This multiplicity and shifting of identifications is not a 'problem' for the audience; on the contrary it is at the heart of the experience and the pleasure of the genre. (Pinedo, 1997: 80)

So, breaking down the 'binary' notions of gender constructs a space, or a 'subject position' from which female viewers can enjoy (some of) these films. The value of Pinedo's work, then, lies in the close attention she is willing to give to textual form, and her willingness to consider differences in the forms of cinematic construction of films, and to think through their possible consequences for audience pleasures. These qualities would allow her to meet certain of Silverman's criteria – perhaps most significantly, his requirement that emergent conceptualizations should have tested themselves against difficult cases. But the difficulties also flow from this – in two ways, at least. First, Pinedo is inconsistent with herself. There is a clash between her wish to determine which films may have 'critical' purchase, and her theoretical claim that pleasure is made possible by mobile identification. It shows very clearly through her discussion of *The Stepfather* (1987) – which she particularly identifies as a 'progressive' film. This film opens on a scene of a man cleaning up after murdering an entire family (which subsequently turns out to be his own) and disappearing – only to reappear in a new guise, married to a new woman who has a teenage daughter. The film follows the daughter's growing suspicions of her stepfather. Gradually it emerges that he is obsessively and serially seeking

a 'perfect American family' which, when it falls short of his ideal, he destroys. In a final showdown, when he turns on them, mother and daughter combine to kill him.

The problem is that this film, while certainly interesting, does not readily fit Pinedo's wider model. There is no ready space for identification with the man, whom the audience know from the very beginning to be a killer. Our concern as watchers is with two things: why he is as he is, and whether the women (and the daughter in particular, through whose eyes we see much of the action) will realize in time and be able to defeat him. In short, this simply isn't a film inviting or requiring cross-gender identification. This weakness seems a version of Silverman's problem about research losing the specificity of materials. For *The Stepfather* to function within her account, it might be necessary to introduce distinctions between the *kinds* of pleasure that accompany the generically typical or atypical slasher movies – something not recognized, because of the incompleteness of this part of her account.

A second, related problem arises from Pinedo's discussion of the film *Candyman* (1992). In her hunt for a critical dimension, she ends up dangerously close to permitting any film of any kind to permit 'subversive' readings:

In the end, *Candyman* depicts both the white woman and the black man as monstrous, but this does not necessarily mean that the film lacks a critical dimension. Considering that a sexist society perceives battered women who kill in self-defense as criminal, if not monstrous, and that a racist society appraises aggressive black men (and sometimes women) as criminals, if not monsters, then is there not some pleasure and sense of power to be gained, at least by female and black audience members, from seeing the power in these violent figures? I believe there is, and that a film like *Candyman* lends itself well to this subversive reading strategy. (Pinedo, 1997: 131).

It is very hard to see, given the criteria, what film would not permit some kind of subversive pleasure. The murderous concentration camp guard in *Schindler's List* (1993) displays strength and power, albeit condemned within the film. The alien in its eponymous (1979, 1986, 1992, 1997) films is strong beyond measure. And so on. On this principle, any strong villain or anti-hero is capable of promoting a 'subversive reading strategy'. What this reveals is something noted in other fields, that the concepts of 'criticality' and of 'resistant readings' have a primarily rhetorical force – here, too detached from the substance of her modes of analysis to have any explanatory power. These difficulties in Pinedo's account, I would argue, arise centrally from too loose an application of concepts, coupled with imprecise application and testing of these concepts against examples. As a result, her research does not perform as well as it at first seemed against Silverman's (2000) and Patton's (1990) requirements of dealing with difficult cases.

Hill (2001)

Annette Hill returns us to qualitative audience research. The essay I am focusing on here, 'Looks Like It Hurts', picks up and develops one strand of the research on which she reported generally in her book *Shocking Entertainment* (Hill, 1997). Hill's research again turned on a challenge to a gap between the common view that women do not enjoy violent films, and her own experience of

pleasure in some very violent films. Her procedure was to locate and interview in groups women who declared themselves fans of at least a number of what had become known as 'new brutalist' films – films such as *Reservoir Dogs*, *Man Bites Dog* and *Bad Lieutenant* (all 1992). Hill reports carefully on how she organized and conducted her interviews, which included showing specific clips to the groups and both watching their bodily reactions and hearing their verbal accounts of their responses, at first viewing and now. Through listening closely to their accounts, she seeks to discover the pattern and process of their pleasure in the films.

There are some striking elements to her findings. The women repeatedly say that they enjoy violence which looks real (thence the title of the essay). She elicits some individual autobiographies which are powerful precisely because unexpected (see Patton [1990: 19–23] for a powerful justification of the use of grounded anecdotes) – for instance, two women who talk of the pleasures of going together to see such films in the aftermath of painful relationship breakups. Their stories reveal that their pleasure was a combination of doing something together, doing something new, and doing something involving encountering and releasing powerful feelings: 'Achievement that I've got myself out and I'm doing things because I did feel better able to define boundaries between myself and the cinema, exhilaration because of the action on the screen and also because I was doing something which wasn't anything I'd done before' (Hill, 2001: 143). Generally, Hill theorizes these through the concepts of 'challenging self', 'testing boundaries' and 'self-censorship'.

The problems with Hill's account all arise *after* data collection, which was in the main scrupulously managed and reported on.² They are connected with Silverman's first and second challenges: that data must encounter theory, but in such a way that the theory is illuminated by the data, and the data take on greater significance through the lens of concepts and theory. I would argue that this doesn't happen. Here as a sample is Hill's commentary on one response:

For Angela, what is challenging about these films is linked to her strong emotional and physical response:

I get palpitations quite often, mm, it's quite awful to admit but I often feel a sense of excitement when I watch violence. Actually, if I am totally truthful, suppressed anger that I've got working its way out. When I go to see a violent film I often get quite a high after I've seen it, you know, you come out from a – maybe not so much with the realistic stuff, you know, like *Pulp Fiction*, or whatever, but no, I do actually. I think it can breed excitement in a sense. I think it's the adrenalin as well, you know. Yeah, you do feel that kind of heightened awareness I think after you've seen violence.

The films are stimulating; they breed, multiply excitement. For Angela, her admission that she exorcises her anger through watching violence films leads to what she calls a 'heightened awareness'. (Hill, 2001: 138)

This commentary does not pass beyond drawing attention to, by repeating, certain potentially interesting-looking expressions. Hill goes no further into the meaning or implications of this 'heightened awareness', nor of her other organizing concepts such as 'challenging boundaries'. In her earlier book (Hill, 1997: 4, 106–7), this problem was partly concealed by the use of an apparently powerful concept. Hill had proposed calling the orientations of the women to these films 'portfolios

of interpretation'. The difficulty is that, however nice the phrase, we have no idea of the conditions for determining the presence of such portfolios. Does everyone have them? Are they all equally developed? Are there distinct 'portfolios' for each audience-category of films? Can they come into conflict with each other? What would happen if a viewer made a mistake and saw a film with the wrong 'portfolio' to hand, as it were?

Perhaps because the problems with this concept had become apparent, in the later essay Hill does not use it – but at the price of a virtual absence of conceptualization.

A final issue concerns the status of the people she interviewed. In each case, we are given a small amount of information about them – for instance, 27-year-old college teacher Alison, or 31-year-old mother Sally. What is not clear was in what way this was relevant information about them. It *appears* that we have a picture of the people involved. But how would our understanding of them as research subjects, about whose pleasures in ultra-violent films we are enquiring, if one of them had been described as 'a 5'7", 92lb net-ball fanatic, blonde, Gap-wearing Tom Hanks-addict'? The problem is one of redundant information, which indicates a lack of a clear *principle of relevance* connecting data to theory.

Cherry (1999)

Brigid Cherry begins from a critique of Mundorf, Zillman and Weaver's position (Mundorf et al., 1989), which so stereotypes men's and women's responses, that men are just understood to enjoy being scared, while women – not liking being scared – just use the occasion of horror viewing to elicit protective behaviour from their 'men'. Using the results of her own survey, she argues that conventional research understates women's enjoyment of horror, because many choose to watch such films on video, in all-female groups. And in a wider historical connection, she proposes that it will assist our understanding if we link research into contemporary female horror fandom with the historical understanding of the 'female Gothic' tradition.

Cherry's research is particularly interesting and persuasive at the points where she quotes accounts which indicate both the *depth* of commitment that a number of women clearly have to the horror genre, and especially its vampiric versions, but also the strongly *sexual* fascination that it holds for them. It is not clear from the published essay how many women and of what kinds contributed to Cherry's research – which is troubling inasmuch as we are asked to attach significance to reports such as that 92 percent of her group said that vampire films were their favourites. But more problematic is her tendency to produce what look like ad hoc explanations, as in the following:

J B Barclay's 1961 survey of viewing tastes indicated that more than half of all girls around the age of fifteen named horror as one of their most liked film genres, almost as many as boys of the same age. Girls, however, professed an increasing dislike for the genre as they matured. This may be explained by patterns of socialisation: girls are dissuaded from liking horror because it is seen as unfeminine, whereas boys are encouraged to display their fearlessness and outgrow it more gradually. (Cherry, 1999: 192)

There are a number of problems with this 'instant explanation'. First, it forecloses other, perhaps more historically resonant explanations – for example, that the films available in the early 1960s

were markedly different (as indeed were women's opportunities to see them). It also carries within it some strange assumptions, which are at odds with some of Cherry's own evidence. Cherry quotes women from whom it is evident that part of the attraction of watching vampire films is that they afford imaginative resources for *resisting* what is perceived to be 'socialized femininity'. The films are *dangerous* and that is part of their appeal. And in these quotes are signs of an interest in horror films which is not to be 'outgrown', as her earlier comment seems to presume:

Fascination with monstrosity is an important factor in the continuing appeal of horror for women. Although respondents mention many different kinds of monsters when describing what they like about horror films, vampires are by far the most frequently mentioned, often in terms of their sexual fascination for women. As a 24-year old respondent puts it:

I have a particular fondness for vampire films, a fascination with the vampire, really. It originated as a sexual feeling evoked in me by the vampire character, and an admiration of his/her style – the elegance of their costume and their aristocracy. As I got older this became a real hobby for me, really, and I began to read a lot to discover the psychology at work behind that. I wanted to understand the evolution of the vampire and to unravel the intrigue surrounding its sexuality.

This fascination for the vampire and its sexuality is typical of many participants, often related to the sexuality and appeal of the male stars playing the dark, handsome, exotic and charismatic vampire popularised by Bela Lugosi, Christopher Lee, Gary Oldman and Antonio Banderas. (Cherry, 1999: 197)

Contained here is a suggestion which could have pointed on to a wider domain of theory, about the role of (certain kinds of) film in providing mirrors for projects of the self. At the least, this is in tension with her earlier apparent acceptance of the idea that horror viewing for women is a 'phase' through which they will pass. Because the tension has apparently gone unnoticed, Cherry does not explore the *kind* of self-project that may be involved here. The result is that, unfortunately, her essay tends to remain at the level of 'fascinating evidence' awaiting theorization.

Discussion

As Silverman found with his own test cases, it is possible to discern some common problems. There are, first, problems with the handling of research materials and data. The simplest of these relate to issues of access to all the information we need, to be able to evaluate researchers' claims. Inasmuch as we wish research to be a contribution to an unfolding collective understanding, it is surely essential that researchers make available what is needed for proper evaluation by others. This is a problem of both omission and commission. Gaps in the provision of information about the research process disable proper evaluation, while the inclusion of redundant information can contribute to an illusory impression of completeness.

Second, there are problems about the relations between materials or data, and concepts and theories. One of the dangers is the slipping in of 'commonsense' accounts, concepts which have some kind of instant appeal. This can particularly be the case where the materials gathered only loosely test a researcher's propositions. In such cases, commentary may never actually surpass a

kind of retelling of the materials themselves – because there is no clear method of analysis which can take the materials to a higher level of theorization.³ Strong research recognizes stringent relations between concepts and evidence, simply because they are of very different orders and make different claims on our understanding.

Third is the problem of spelling out concepts and models with sufficient precision that implications – with attendant possibilities for further research and testing – can be seen and drawn. I would want to argue that part of the problem here lies in the remarkably loose ways in which we have come to use the word ‘theory’ in some parts of media, communication and cultural studies. Perhaps this is nowhere more clear than in the expression ‘film theory’, which holds indiscriminately within it almost anything that is not factual information.

Fourth, is a version of Silverman’s tests of practice. If researchers felt impelled to ask themselves what further research might *test* the nature of the claims, patterns and associations which are very typically the outcomes of cultural studies-influenced research in our fields, the strengths and limitations of their achievements would become more visible.

There is, finally, a dimension to all these researches which returns us to some of the philosophical and political roots which have re-energized recent qualitative enquiries: the dimension of ownership. There is a substantial tradition (to which much of my own work without question belongs) of seeking to research *on behalf of* particular (often silenced, marginalized) groups. This is the point at which the idea of hermeneutically ‘seeking the perspective’ of those we are researching intersects with the idea of ‘allowing the subaltern to speak’. While there may not always be obvious tests of practice and application, there can be tests of recognition and relevance.

I therefore propose the following five modified versions of Silverman’s criteria as a starting point for future evaluation of qualitative researches in our fields:

1. *Research materials and data*: How systematically are the materials made accessible to fellow researchers? How closely relevant do they remain to the research tasks undertaken? Are there materials which resist the analysis, and has the research itself sought these out, as part of testing its account? How well has it shown itself able to cope with these resistant materials?
2. *The encounter between evidence and concepts*: Has the research anywhere taken its materials or its conceptual framework as self-evident, or self-explanatory? What are the origins and provenance of the concepts deployed in the research? To what extent does the evidence from the research lead to clarification and specification of the research’s organising concepts?
3. *Elaborating the conceptual and theoretical framework*: How far does the research identify, make clear and explicate the wider implications and implicit claims that are consequent upon its claims, and how might these be tested?
4. *Laying the basis for further research*: How far does the research make visible some further tests which would both more securely ground its claims, and associate its findings with other related researches?

5. *To whom is the research relevant, and how might it have practical consequences or implications?* Whose understandings of the world might be altered by the findings of the research? How far are they able to recognize, and relate to, the picture and claims of the research? What practical consequences for them follow from the research's account?

Implications and proposals

What advantages might flow from the development of quality measures such as these? I believe, several. First, they could constitute training methods. Without raising them to the level of a formulaic checklist, such measures could help students at the point when they are often, in my experience, struggling with the difficulty of moving from making passing critical remarks on work they read, to engaging in *critique* – that is, evaluating work in such a way as to bring into clear view its structure of argument, and the relations between evidence, concepts and theory. Quality measures such as these can encourage the development of a sense of the *relative strengths and weaknesses* of research, as opposed to toggle-switch acceptance or rejection.

Second, measures such as these could contribute to changing the still uneasy status of qualitative research, and the recurrent sense in some sectors of our broad field that – even where necessary – it is somehow preliminary or incomplete.

Third, I would seriously propose such measures of quality in qualitative research as a provocation to those colleagues for whom the *lack* of quality measures allows an avoidance. The 'retreat into epistemology', or in other words the tendency to reduce disagreements over the value of arguments to philosophical disagreements and positional conflicts, could usefully be challenged by having to deal with widely agreed criteria for debating achievements.

Finally, I wonder if a wider use of quality measures such as these could have some diagnostic power. To address the state of play in specific subfields of media, communication and cultural studies with such 'tools' to hand might enable researchers collectively to identify specific kinds of shortfall. If, for instance, in a field where qualitative research makes a substantial contribution it was realized that a persistent problem was a gap between evidential base and conceptual apparatus, this very realization might provoke the kinds of debate by which academic progress can be made.

Clearly these proposals require much testing and probably resultant sharpening. But they do have the virtue, I believe, of being genuinely qualitative criteria for a qualitative field of research.

Notes

1. It is tempting to criticize Pinedo for her use of anecdotal audience responses to particular points. At a number of points in her book, she introduces unnamed, unidentified 'women I have spoken to' as sources of evidence. Although troublesome, this seems to me largely irrelevant to the central thrust of her research and her argument, which is avowedly textual.

2. Actually, there are some smaller problems here. Hill reports, for instance, that her interviewees 'repeatedly' talked about 'testing their boundaries'. Because we know neither what questions were asked (which might have made this an expected answer) nor what range of expressions are gathered

up under this heading, we have to take on trust her assertion. This is a problem only partly at the doors of the researchers themselves. Given typical length restrictions on publications, the 'clobber' of research procedures can be the first thing to go in trimming a research report to the required limits. With the slow but (I believe) inexorable rise of online publication, where word-limits are potentially much looser, this problem should be more readily resolvable in the future.

3. In the opposite direction, it must be noted that mass communication research has been particularly prone to taking hold of 'commonsense' terms and representing them with virtually reversed meaning, without explanation. In another place, I have noted how this works with terms such as 'exposure', 'consumption' and 'escape' (Barker, 1998).

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